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# Vietnam's Navy: Defending Territorial Claims

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A Research Paper

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EA 85-10153C  
IA 85-10053C

September 1985

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NGA Review Completed

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# **Vietnam's Navy: Defending Territorial Claims**

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**A Research Paper**

This paper was prepared by [ ] Office of  
East Asian Analysis, [ ]

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It was coordinated with the Directorate of  
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Division, Office of East Asian Analysis, [ ]

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**Vietnam's Navy:  
Defending Territorial Claims**

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**Overview**

*Information available  
as of 30 July 1985  
was used in this report.*

Faced with regional tensions, growing Chinese naval power, and competing claims for South China Sea territory, Vietnam has been steadily strengthening its ability to defend offshore territories and coastal waters.

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Vietnamese forces on strategically important islands near the coast present formidable obstacles to an invasion force. However, despite modernization efforts, we doubt that units defending the more distant Spratlys could withstand a determined Chinese assault. China can commit overwhelming forces while Vietnamese air support is largely unavailable and reinforcement by sea is problematical at best. Furthermore, the Soviets almost certainly have made no commitment regarding possible reactions to a Chinese attack against the Spratlys, and Hanoi probably does not plan on direct Soviet intervention. Both Hanoi and Moscow probably hope that close military ties and the Soviet military presence at Cam Ranh Bay will deter the Chinese. Should hostilities erupt, we believe the Soviets would resupply the Vietnamese and provide reconnaissance, intelligence, and advisory assistance.

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China probably will not take military action against Vietnam's Spratly Islands for at least the next few years. Their efforts to develop amphibious assault capabilities, however, will increasingly place Chinese leaders in a stronger position to enforce their claims to the Vietnamese-held islands.

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We do not foresee a Vietnamese military action to gain control of the other islands in the Spratlys now occupied by the Philippines, Taiwan, and Malaysia for at least the next few years. Nonetheless, as Vietnamese naval capabilities improve, Hanoi will be in a better position to act militarily should it decide to do so.

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## Vietnam's Exclusive Economic Zone



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Boundary representation is  
not necessarily authoritative.

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### Vietnam's Navy: Defending Territorial Claims

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None of the several claimants to the disputed islands in the South China Sea is soon likely to make diplomatic concessions on the islands and the potentially oil-rich surrounding seabed. Indeed, several have taken extensive measures to build and maintain island garrisons. Vietnam, in particular, has recently reemphasized the strategic and potential economic value of its island possessions and territorial waters. Visits this year by Party Secretary Le Duan to Vung Tau, a base for offshore oil exploration, and by Defense Minister Van Tien Dung to the Spratly Islands, underscore the importance of these areas to Hanoi (see appendix A).

China poses the strongest military threat to Vietnam. Beijing has been steadily expanding and upgrading its naval forces, in part to extend its operational range to disputed territories including the Spratlys.

Other claimants to the islands also pose military challenges, which Hanoi cannot ignore. Although distance largely rules out Taiwan military action, the Philippines and Malaysia enjoy a modest geographic advantage over the Vietnamese.

#### Improving Coastal Defenses

The Vietnamese Navy is primarily a coastal defense force, reflecting Hanoi's chief maritime security concern. The 200-nautical-mile Exclusive Economic Zone declared in 1977 and expanded offshore interests have increased substantially Vietnam's claimed territorial waters and, consequently, the Navy's coastal patrolling responsibility. Most vessels acquired since 1978 are patrol craft intended for coastal operations. Some are equipped with Soviet-made SS-N-2 Styx antishipping and SA-N-5 Grail surface-to-air missiles, providing limited antiship and antiaircraft capabilities. Soviet- and Polish-made minesweepers provide some defense against efforts to close important Vietnamese ports.

While expanding the surface fleet, Hanoi has taken other measures to reinforce coastal defenses. Vietnam in 1980 acquired the Soviet-made SSC-IB Sepal

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cruise missile system, providing for the first time a long-range antiship capability. [redacted] new garrison and support facilities with four launchers at Do Son, southeast of Haiphong, indicating the missiles would be deployed there in wartime. From Do Son, the Sepals could strike targets anywhere in the Gulf of Tonkin up to 300 km distant, including ships operating off the west coast of China's Hainan Dao (Hainan Island).<sup>1</sup> Although primarily intended to protect the sea approaches to Haiphong, the missiles probably would also play an important role in defending Vietnam's Dao Bach Long Vi (Nightingale Island), which lies midway between the mainland and Hainan. [redacted]

In addition, Hanoi has deployed at least one Army division to the island chain that is part of Quang Ninh Province. The province has been designated the Quang Ninh Special Zone, forming a separate defensive region within the military command and control structure. Army troops equipped with field and anti-aircraft artillery occupy heavily fortified positions on the islands. These are the only islands garrisoned by Army units, indicating that Hanoi has devised a special interservice defensive plan for this zone to counter a potential Chinese amphibious assault. [redacted]

Meanwhile, the Vietnamese moved earlier this year to bolster the Navy's capabilities in the south, probably to protect offshore oil-drilling operations. [redacted]

<sup>1</sup> For the Sepals to be effective at maximum range, a midcourse correction is required. Lacking the proper equipment, Vietnam would depend on Moscow to provide the course adjustment: Cam Ranh-based TU-95 Bear D aircraft have this capability. Should hostilities erupt in the Gulf of Tonkin, we believe the Soviets would help Vietnam target the Sepals. Hormone "B" helicopters also have this radar but we cannot confirm that any of Vietnam's Hormones are the "B" variant. [redacted]

### Stressing Antisubmarine Warfare

Responding primarily to the threat posed by China's growing submarine force, we believe the Navy's anti-submarine warfare (ASW) program has top priority and will receive most naval resources for the next several years. Chinese submarines already have a substantial advantage over Vietnamese defenses and [redacted] the submarine force will remain key to Beijing's naval defense strategy. Although Hanoi will be hard pressed to close the gap, some improvements have been made in recent years. The three Petya II-class frigates Vietnam has acquired since 1983 are primarily ASW ships and are a marked improvement over the two modified Petya I's delivered in 1978. All five warships are equipped with torpedoes, depth charges, and antisubmarine rockets. Together with several SO-1 subchasers, they form the bulk of Vietnamese ASW forces. [redacted]

We expect the Vietnamese eventually to establish a submarine force to bolster its ASW capabilities. We believe the Soviet-made Whiskey-class submarine is the most likely candidate. The Whiskey is the closest Soviet model to China's Romeo-class submarine, the most likely adversary of Vietnamese ASW forces.

According to [redacted] a Soviet Whiskey that participated as a target in joint ASW exercises in 1981 remains in Cam Ranh Bay. [redacted]

The Vietnamese have established a naval air unit at Cat Bi and Kien An airfields near Haiphong to support ASW operations. [redacted]

[redacted] the regimental-size unit is equipped with 13 KA-25 (Hormone) helicopters and four BE-12 (Mail) amphibious aircraft that can perform maritime reconnaissance and deliver torpedoes

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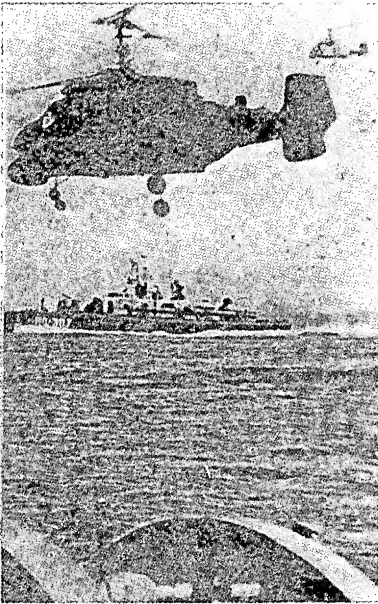
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*Vietnamese warships and helicopters  
conducting antisubmarine warfare  
exercise.*

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and depth charges against enemy submarines. However, [redacted] indicate that several of the Hormones are inoperable and the helicopter's limited range largely restricts combined surface/air ASW operations to a maximum of 170 km. The Hormone must operate from land bases as none of Vietnam's warships can accommodate helicopters. [redacted]

#### Vietnam's Fledgling Marines

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Since 1982 we have noted increased emphasis in the military press on the role of Vietnam's Marines, or naval infantry, which serve as the primary ground defense force for coastal areas and offshore islands. These articles stress the need to improve and expand the Marine forces and to develop amphibious landing capabilities. [redacted]

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[redacted] the overall size of the Vietnamese Marine force is between 9,000 and 13,000 men. [redacted]

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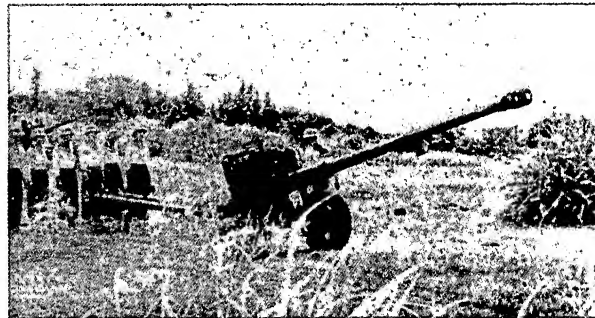
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*"The Marines were formed above all [to conduct] amphibious landing operations." Quan Doi Nhan Dan, Feb 84.*



*"... Marine units must know how to take full advantage of the firepower of... various kinds of accompanying artillery..." Quan Doi Nhan Dan, Feb 84.*

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At present, at least two Vietnamese Marine brigades plus one battalion are deployed to defend the Vietnamese-claimed Spratly Islands and Hon Tho Chau (Tho Chau Island) in the South China Sea, and on Dao Bach Long Vi (Bach Long Vi Island) in the Gulf of Tonkin. The Marines defending Bach Long Vi—with a maze of concrete-hardened trenches, bunkers, and caves and well within the range of supporting Vietnamese air, naval, and cruise missile forces—would present a formidable obstacle to any invasion force. Defense of the Spratlys, on the other hand, would be more problematical. Although fortifications give the Marines an important tactical advantage over invading troops, they would be forced to operate without air support and, at least initially, without naval support. Faced with these circumstances, we think it is unlikely that the Vietnamese Marines could withstand a determined Chinese attack. At best, Hanoi could expect the Marines to delay assault forces on any of these islands, allowing time for reinforcements to arrive.

Vietnamese military writers often point to the Soviet Naval Infantry (SNI) as a model for future development, and we expect Hanoi to dedicate more resources to the further development of the Marines over the next few years. The current table of organization and equipment of the Vietnamese Marine force, however, bears little resemblance to the SNI, as the Vietnamese lack adequate mechanized amphibious landing craft and amphibious transport vessels.

The Vietnamese press also reports the existence of elite, naval special operations teams. According to these reports, such teams have existed for at least 10 years and participated in the capture of South Vietnamese-held islands in 1975. An April 1985 article in the Vietnamese Army newspaper discussed a recent training exercise in which naval commando teams

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**Vietnam's Marines**

*The Marines are armed and equipped similarly to conventional Vietnamese Army infantry, although they wear naval uniforms and are trained to operate in naval vessels in seaborne assault tactics. Our analysis of two of the five Marine brigades shows that both contain five rifle battalions and an artillery/antiaircraft battalion. The artillery/antiaircraft battalion provides fire support, under the direct control of the Marine brigade commander, for operations conducted beyond the range of naval gunfire or air support, or for static island defense where there would be little or no naval gunfire support. Essays in the Vietnamese military press have discussed the use of organic tank battalions in Marine operations, and occasionally have included photos of Marines training with Soviet-built PT-76 light amphibious tanks, but we have not identified any operational armored units with Vietnamese Marine brigades to date. References have also been made to the future development of airborne units within the Marines.*



*Marines training with PT-76 amphibious tanks.*

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**Table 2**  
**Vietnam's Garrisons**  
**in the Spratly Islands**

	Crew Served Weapons	Remarks
Amboyna Cay	4 37/57-mm antiaircraft artillery (AAA) 2 heavy machineguns	
Central Reef	5 heavy machineguns	
Namyit Island	2 130-mm field guns 2 100-mm field guns 4 122-mm howitzers 6 37-mm AAA 2 heavy machineguns 8 T-34 tanks	Helicopter pad
Pearson Reef	4 37-mm AAA 4 heavy machineguns 1 ZPU-4	
Sand Cay	2 85/100-mm field guns 6 37/57-mm AAA 9 heavy machineguns	Helicopter pad
Sin Cowe Island	2 100/85 field guns 6 37/57-mm AAA	Helicopter pad
Southwest Cay	4 PT-76 tanks 1 heavy machinegun 6 37-mm AAA	Helicopter pad
Spratly Island	4 130-mm field guns 6 37/57-mm AAA 4 heavy machineguns	550-meter landing strip
Unnamed Cay	4 heavy machineguns	

practiced beach landings from rubber boats; the object of the training was to harass a notional enemy amphibious landing force. Although we have no data regarding the strength or organization of Vietnamese naval special operations units, we believe they are an integral part of Hanoi's coastal and island defense plan.

#### Hanoi's Defensive Predicament

Distance largely dictates Hanoi's ability to reinforce and defend its island holdings. We believe the Vietnamese Navy could easily transport men and material to Dao Bach Long Vi and other islands close to the

mainland.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Air Force MIG-21s and SU-22s could provide air superiority and ground-attack support for the nearby islands, although these aircraft lack modern antiship weapons.

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Unlike the coastal islands, we do not believe a concerted Vietnamese effort to reinforce the Spratlys is a certainty. Faced with overwhelming odds, Hanoi could well decide to let the island garrisons stand on their own rather than risk limited naval assets and broader conflict in a potentially futile effort.

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The Air Force, meanwhile, could do little to help defend the Spratlys. The MIG-21's limited range rules out effective air cover and, while the SU-22s can reach the islands, time over target is severely limited.

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<sup>3</sup> Available craft include three Polish-made Polnocnys, a few aging ex-US landing craft, and several coastal transports that could deliver hundreds of tons of cargo and several hundred troops to one or more besieged islands.

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extending the Navy's operational range. In any event, we doubt that the Air Force will acquire aircraft capable of providing long-range air superiority and ground attack support any time soon.

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Moscow almost certainly has made no commitment to the Vietnamese regarding possible reactions to a Chinese attack on the Spratlys, and Vietnamese strategists probably do not plan on direct Soviet intervention. The Soviets probably calculate that close ties with Hanoi and their own military presence at Cam Ranh Bay serve to deter Chinese military action against Vietnam. If faced with hostilities in the Spratlys, we believe Moscow would try to strike a balance between the assistance required to ensure continued close ties to Vietnam and its desire to avoid a military clash with China. At a minimum, a Chinese attack against the Spratlys probably would prompt the Soviets to issue statements warning Beijing of the "dangerous implications" of their actions while leaving vague Soviet intentions. The USSR, however, probably would resupply the Vietnamese, conduct reconnaissance operations, and provide intelligence and advisory assistance. They probably would also reinforce their naval forces in the South China Sea and conduct operations to demonstrate support for Vietnam.

#### **The Potential for Conflict at Sea**

We do not expect a Chinese military action to seize control of the Vietnamese-held Spratlys or coastal islands for at least the next few years. Although it maintains constant military pressure against the Vietnamese along their common land border, Beijing has limited the fighting to a relatively narrow area in Vietnam's Ha Tuyen Province and we see no indication that China intends to expand radically the scope of the conflict.

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In the long term, however, we believe Sino-Vietnamese tensions could be manifested at sea, where Beijing could seize one or more of Vietnam's Spratlys or numerous coastal islands under the pretext of a "second lesson" despite potentially exorbitant political costs. Efforts to develop amphibious assault capabilities place China in an increasingly stronger position to exercise this option, in our judgment.

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We do not foresee any substantial improvement in Vietnam's ability to defend the Spratlys for the next few years. Although we doubt that Hanoi considers present capabilities adequate for the long term, most of the Navy's already limited budgetary resources will be dedicated to securing Vietnam's coastal waters. Once Hanoi believes these waters are adequately secured, we expect more attention to be focused on

On the other hand, we believe a Vietnamese assault against any of the other occupied islands in the Spratlys is extremely unlikely. Preoccupied with resolving the Cambodia issue, Hanoi will not risk further damage to its international image or become involved in another conflict by attempting to enforce militarily its territorial claims. As naval capabilities improve, however, Vietnamese leaders will be in a better position to exercise the military option should they decide to do so.

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## Appendix A

### Competing Claims in the South China Sea

Vietnam claims nearly all the South China Sea islands, including the Spratlys and the Chinese-occupied Paracels. In addition, Hanoi has a long-running dispute with Indonesia over sea boundary demarcation in the Kepulauan Natuna (Natuna Islands) area. Hanoi has expanded its offshore claims in recent years and now occupies nine islands in the Spratlys, Bach Long Vi Island (Nightingale Island) in the Gulf of Tonkin, and numerous undisputed islands along the coastline. [ ]

**The Spratlys:** Vietnam, China, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Malaysia claim one or more of approximately 100 islands, shoals, and reefs in the Spratlys group spread over 64,000 square miles of ocean. China is the only nation with a claim that does not have military forces on any of the islands. Hanoi in 1975 wrested control of five islands from the South Vietnamese as the Saigon government neared collapse. The Vietnamese since then have occupied four more islands in the group. [ ]

**The Paracels:** Competing Chinese and South Vietnamese claims to the Paracels stretch back to the 1950s. In 1956, South Vietnamese troops replaced French units stationed on several of the islands, prompting Beijing to construct a naval base on one island and garrison 200 troops on two others. After Saigon occupied additional islands in 1973, China in early 1974 launched a successful air and naval attack against the South Vietnamese and seized control of the entire group. Hanoi at that time did not protest China's action but continued to claim dominion over the Paracels. [ ]

**Kepulauan Natuna:** Territorial disputes with Indonesia center around delineating the seabed boundary near Kepulauan Natuna. Seven rounds of negotiations conducted since 1979 have failed to produce an agreement. Diplomatic relations between the two countries have not been seriously affected, however. [ ]

#### Vietnam's Case

The Vietnamese have attempted to build a case around detailed historical, geological, and geographic data to support their South China Sea island claims. A Foreign Ministry whitebook issued in 1982 recounts Vietnamese activities in the Spratly and Paracel Islands over the past several hundred years and cites documents purportedly validating Vietnamese ownership. Similar evidence submitted by Beijing to back Chinese claims is dismissed as only "semiofficial" by Vietnam which contends it was the first nation to discover and occupy the two disputed island groups. [ ]

Although publicly based on legal right, the strategic and possible economic value of South China Sea islands and surrounding seabed areas are major factors behind Hanoi's claims. The Spratlys and Paracels are situated near vital air and sea lines of communication across the South China Sea and important approaches to Vietnam. Hanoi also has closely monitored offshore oil exploration throughout the region. In addition to the Philippines exploration around Palawan Island, Hanoi probably has kept careful tabs on Indonesian operations in the Natunas area and Chinese activities around the Paracel Islands. [ ]

[ ] Vietnamese geologists and oil experts have conducted studies of the Spratlys since 1979 but financial constraints have precluded test drilling. Meanwhile, Hanoi's plans to explore areas around the Paracels have been blocked by China's military presence there, while failure to reach agreement with Indonesia on the sea boundary has curtailed offshore exploration in the Natunas area. [ ]

Despite competing claims with other Southeast Asian nations, Vietnam has concentrated on quarrels with China, in our opinion, to gain maximum propaganda

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## Maritime Claims



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value in light of larger disputes between the two countries. As relations soured in 1978, Hanoi began to proclaim publicly Vietnamese territorial claims vis-a-vis China and to denounce Chinese occupation of the Paracels. Since then, harsh Vietnamese rhetoric on the issue has been aimed almost solely at Beijing. In open writings, Hanoi lumps China's offshore claims and holdings with Sino-Vietnamese border tensions and Chinese support for Cambodian resistance forces to back charges of Chinese "expansionism" in Southeast Asia.

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Hanoi has taken a low-key approach toward territorial disputes with other nations. Although Malaysia, the Philippines, and Taiwan maintain military garrisons in the Spratlys, the 1982 whitebook and subsequent public statements make only passing reference to these claimants. In fact, Hanoi on at least one occasion, called on Southeast Asian nations to set aside their disagreements and unite against the Chinese. Vietnam also has avoided inflammatory public statements against Indonesia; Hanoi is on better terms with Jakarta than with any other ASEAN member. With Vietnam and ASEAN at loggerheads over Cambodia, Hanoi undoubtedly strives to avoid damaging relations with this key ASEAN member by playing down differences over a clearly secondary issue.

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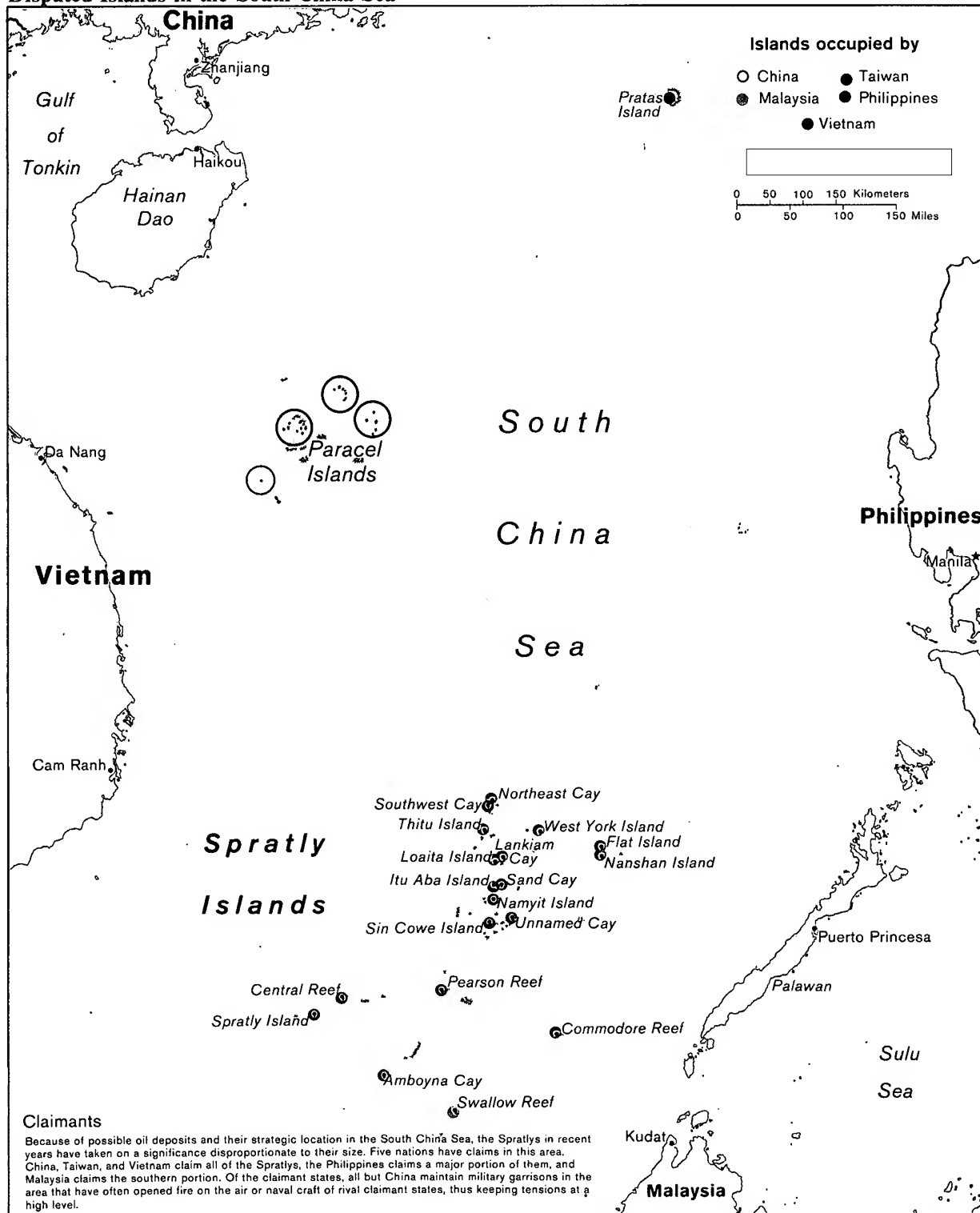
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## Disputed Islands in the South China Sea



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## Appendix B

## Spratlys Claimants and Occupants

Name	Claimed By:	Occupied By:
Amboy Cay	China, Vietnam, Taiwan, Malaysia, Philippines	Vietnam
Central Reef	China, Vietnam, Taiwan, Philippines	Vietnam
Commodore Reef	China, Vietnam, Taiwan, Malaysia, Philippines	Philippines
Flat Island	China, Vietnam, Taiwan, Philippines	Philippines
Itu Aba	China, Vietnam, Taiwan, Philippines	Taiwan
Lankiam Cay	China, Vietnam, Taiwan, Philippines	Philippines
Laoita	China, Vietnam, Taiwan, Philippines	Philippines
Namyit	China, Vietnam, Taiwan, Philippines	Vietnam
Nanshan	China, Vietnam, Taiwan, Philippines	Philippines
Northeast Cay	China, Vietnam, Taiwan, Philippines	Philippines
Pearson Reef	China, Vietnam, Taiwan, Philippines	Vietnam
Sand Cay	China, Vietnam, Taiwan, Philippines	Vietnam
Sin Cowe	China, Vietnam, Taiwan, Philippines	Vietnam
Southwest Cay	China, Vietnam, Taiwan, Philippines	Vietnam
Spratly Island	China, Vietnam, Taiwan, Philippines	Vietnam
Swallow Reef	Malaysia	Malaysia
Thitu	China, Vietnam, Taiwan, Philippines	Philippines
Unnamed Cay	China, Vietnam, Taiwan, Philippines	Vietnam
West York Island	China, Vietnam, Taiwan, Philippines	Philippines

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## Appendix C

## Major Vietnamese Warships

Class Name/Type	Number	Home Port	Range (nm) Full Power/ Economical	Armament	Remarks
Petya-II FFL	3	Da Nang Vung Tao	450/4,800	2 2x76.2-mm dual-purpose guns 2 5x40-cm torpedo tubes 2 RB4 6000 ASW launchers 2 depth charge racks	
Export Petya FFL	2	Da Nang Vung Dao	450/4,800	2 2x76.2-mm dual-purpose guns 1 3x53-cm torpedo tube 4 RBU 2500 ASW launchers 2 depth charge racks	
Ex-US Savage PGF	1	Ho Chi Minh City	6,120/11,500	2 1x76.2-mm dual-purpose guns 2 2x37-mm guns 1 US HEDGEHOG ASW 1 depth charge rack	May no longer be operational.
Ex-US Barnegat Class	1	Ho Chi Minh City	?/22,000	1 1x127-mm dual-purpose gun 3 2x37-mm guns 2 SS-N-2 launch rails	SS-N-2 system installed on fantail. May no longer be operational.
Turya PTH	3	Da Nang	650/1,420	1 2x57-mm dual-purpose gun 1 2x25-mm gun 4 1x53-cm torpedo tubes	
Ex-US PGM's	16	Various	1,100/1,400	Various	Number operational unknown.
Osa-II PTG	8	Ha Tao	500/750	4 SS-N-2 missile launchers 2 2x30-mm guns	
S.O. 1 PCS	8	Da Nang	340/1,900	2 2x25-mm guns 4 RB4 1200 ASWs	
Shershen PT	16	Ha Tao Da Nang	460/1,000	2 2x30-mm guns 4 1x53-cm torpedo tubes 2 depth charge racks	
Ex-US Admirable PC	2	Ho Chi Minh City 1 unit unknown	4,500/6,800	1 1x57-mm gun 2 1x40-mm guns 1 2x37-mm gun	Only one ship may be marginally operational.
Shanghai-II PC	8	Haiphong	440/725	2 2x37-mm guns 2 2x25-mm guns	
LST-1/LST-511 LST	3	Unknown	15,000/ 18,000		At least two ships operation- al. Seen at Cam Ranh and Ho Chi Minh City.
Polnocny LSM	3	Haiphong	900/1,500		Seen at Haiphong, Ho Chi Minh City, and Cam Ranh.
Ex-US LSM-1	3				Probably nonoperational.
Yurka MSF	2	Da Nang	2,000/3,200	2 2x30-mm guns	

## Note:

1. Vietnam operates numerous riverine patrol craft not included in this table because they are not suited for open ocean operations.
2. An unknown number of coastal transports are operated by the Navy. At least six have been seen at Cam Ranh.

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